WINGS IN THE NIGHT

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WINGS
IN THE NIGHT

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BY

ALICE DUER MILLER
Author of "Come Out of the Kitchen,"
"Ladies Must Live," etc

NEW YORK
THE CENTURY CO.
1918

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CONTENTS

	PAGE
Invocation	3
The Way	4
Late Comers	5
The Heritage	6
Exile	9
Harbor	11
After a Quarrel	13
Won't it be Curious?	15
A Creed	16
In a School Chapel	17
The Penitent	18
The Woman at the Cross-Roads	20
Song in Exile	24
Batalha	26
Easton's Beach	27
The Railroad Station	28
To a Certain Gentleman	29
House Pets	30

CONTENTS

PAGE

To an Old Lady in a Train 32
Spring 34
A Bread and Butter Letter 35
The Party 36
The History of a Minute 38
Before Spring 40
The Stars 41
To Remorse 42
The Price of Peace 43
An American to France 44
Strange Gods 45
Newport 46
Brandon 47

WINGS
IN THE NIGHT

INVOCATION

NIGHT after night within the grove
The night wind spares the sacred fire —
The breath made visible of love,
Of worship and desire.

I set the tripod at thy shrine,
The silver bowl, the amber flame,
And in the dark where no stars shine
I speak thy name.

By the high name I call on thee
Which only I, thy priestess, know.
I tread thy dance in ecstasy,
Sweet steps and slow.

O God, the hour has come. Appear!
I have performed the appointed rite —
The dance, the fire; I long to hear
Wings in the night.

THE WAY

THERE is a magic pathway through the wood,
  There is a current in the troubled stream,
A happy course to steer, if one but could,
    A meaning to the dream.

And some in love and some in dogma find
  The hint eternal as they kiss or pray;
Some through the crystal circle of the mind
    Discern the way.

And some no hint, no pattern of the whole,
  Nor star, nor path, nor channel can perceive —
Attempt no answer to the questing soul,
    And yet believe

There is a magic pathway through the wood,
  A quiet current in the troubled stream,
A happy course to steer, if one but could,
    A meaning to the dream.

LATE COMERS

Oft on my way, my daily task pursuing,
  Meet I two fairy figures face to face,
Beauty and Peace, who smile on me, embuing
  All else I see with something of their grace.

Not in my youth did I their shapes discover,
  Not in those hours of transport and despairs,
Rather they come now that high noon is over,
  And like sweet ghosts they make the twilight theirs.

Constant and shy, they seek those spirits only
  Who have made silence for their soft behests;
Whose garnished thresholds, welcoming and lonely,
  Faithful await the long desired guests.

THE HERITAGE.

On summer evenings when the full moon shines
Serene and fair,
High in the crystal air,
On hillsides deep in birches and in pines,
Then in all hearts there stirs a hidden fire
Of hope, or memory;
Some their beloved dead more yearningly desire,
Some dream of loves to be,
Some weep their swift and sweet mortality.

But I remember only,
  Long centuries ago,
A glen more dark and lonely
  Than these which now I know;
The noise of waters flowing,
And faint, salt breezes blowing,
Ivy and myrtle growing,
  As here they do not grow.

There, when the moon was at full we would come, we would come,
To the shrilling of pipes, and the terrible tone of the drum
Rolling long, rolling loud, as the voice that presages the rain,
We would come to the cavern profound, to the holy domain.
Then in the moonlight entrancing,
Figures moved agile and fleet,
Then there was dancing, ay, dancing,
Leaping and stamping of feet,—
Dancers that drifted and darted,
Light as a leaf in the breeze,
Circles that met and that parted,
While the stars danced through the trees.
Quickening, the drums beat the measure,
All the night long on the hill,—
Such was the Thunderer's pleasure. . . .
This I remember me still.

O placid northern moon on this calm lake
Beaming demure and tame,

How can I take
Aught of delight in thy pale flame?
I ache
For a communion I have known
Long centuries ago,
Which nevermore the world will seek, or know;
For a belief outgrown,
Yet how much more my own
Than creeds that hold me quiet on my knees;
For rites that brought delights like these,
And Gods I once knew how to please.

EXILE

I

At dead of night about the dying fire
They told a story how the dead appear;
And men, grown still with fear,
Forgot their old desire
For those who once were dear,
And shook and trembled lest their dead be near.

Alas, poor dead who were so sweet and human!
How are you grown a menace and a blight —
A thing to shun, a thing of evil omen,—
Stealing unwelcome through the halls of night?
Who knows? perhaps yourselves are much affrighted,
And struggle back, remote and bodiless,
Fearful of sounds unheard, visions unsighted,
Black echoes, and the bitter loneliness.

But for me, in my heart is no dread
Of the coming again of the dead,

But a terror of life, without one
Who made life to be life — and is gone.

II

Yes, at these tales of how the dead return,
Hope stirs within my spirit more than fear.
So strange, so strange it seems, you are not here,
And so unnatural to me 'tis to learn
The trick of life without you, year by year,

That not so strange could any specter be
Or fall of footsteps on the empty stair,
Or shapes discerned upon the shadowy air,
As is this haunting sense of vacancy,
And your persisting absence everywhere.

Ah, could I see, as in the tranquil past,
The form I long for — always and in vain,—
Should I not cry, like one released from pain:
"Dear and long absent, you return at last,
And life its natural aspect wears again!"

HARBOR

And will you rest at last, storm-beaten spirit,
In this poor heart, who would your haven be,
Will you sink down at last, content to inherit
The common treasures of tranquillity?
Will you forget your high and fierce endeavor,
The hinted island and the hidden seas,
Defeats, escapes, adventures, that forever
Left you more sad, and never more at ease?

When the west wind on summer evenings blowing
Brings to your ears the sound of sails that fill,
And moving ships eclipse your starlight, going
To lands unseen, and fates that beckon still;
When you shall see beneath the moon new risen,
The hissing wake of other vessels' foam,
Will not this land-locked harbor seem a prison
Where calms and shallows mock the name of home?

Ah, when your longing for the open ocean
  Captures your heart, and bids you set your sail,
Feeble will be the bonds of my devotion;
  Little will love — your own or mine — avail:
Happy to you will seem some ship-wrecked stranger,
  Keener than love the zest of being free,
Sweeter than peace, the summoning of danger; —
  Some day at sunrise you will put to sea.

AFTER A QUARREL

We have quarreled; ugly things have been said,
Bitter things, in a tone controlled, well-bred,
Temperate; we weighed our words, lest the lust
Of cruelty lose the edge of being just.
We have quarreled over a trifle, one of those trifles
That strike their roots to the very heart of each,
To the cold and earthy places where even love stifles,
And kindness and friendly habit cannot reach;
Those unexplored vaults of the spirit, black, unknown,
Where each is a king, but a king ashamed, alone,
Afraid of the world, afraid of friend and foe.
Oh, human creatures must quarrel, my dear, I know;
But if we must, let 's quarrel for something great,
For something final and dangerous — mastery, hate,
Freedom, or jealousy, virtue, death, or life:
For then two loves leap up on the wings of strife
Into the sun and air of their own souls' sight,

Locked together, joined, putting forth all their might
That love may survive or fail, or perish or win,
But perish not for a trifle. That is sin.

WON'T IT BE CURIOUS?

Won't it be curious when I am dead;
Some one, unknown to me, here in my stead?
Curious surely for others to see
Trifles I made or marred outlasting me;
All my possessions — bracelets and rings,
Young and unaltered like immortal things.

Young and unaltered, always the same
Changeless the lamp though we blow out the flame.

A CREED

Courage to ask of love neither sign nor token,
Wisdom to wait, silence and faith are better;
Fear, not alone lest the bond be some day broken,
But that love, too desperately dear, become a fetter.

IN A SCHOOL CHAPEL

The clear young voices rise and soar: "Oh, pray
Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they
Shall prosper that love thee." Yet each boy's heart
Harbors the hope that he may have a part
In war — the roar of guns, the roll of drums —
Before this anthemed peace he prays for comes.
But in the quiet gallery above
Where eyes grown dim look down on those they love
The prayer for peace rings true; although in truth
Worse things than death can come to eager youth.
But nothing worse can come to age than knowing
That it is safe, and boys are going, going,
Are going forth to war till all wars cease:
The old, so safe and lonely, pray for peace.

THE PENITENT

"NEVER," he said, "nevermore,
In the murmuring stillness of night
Shall I wait for her hand on my door,
Confident, light;
Still is the night as before,
And the stars unforgettably bright.

"Once from the deep woodland calms
At midnight a wild wind broke,
Shaking the cedars and palms
And the silver-gray oak;
And she, who had slept in my arms,
Suddenly woke.

"Pity me then, for it blew
Last night again from the woodlands so deep,
Where mosses and moisture and dew
Verdure eternal keep;

From the brooks and the glades that we knew,
It woke me from sleep.

"How can she know and refrain?
How being mine can she leave me like this?
Go, when this only is plain,
Life is no more than our kiss —
Life is so lavish of pain,
So niggard of bliss!"

THE WOMAN AT THE CROSS-ROADS

(*Her lover speaks.*)

An equal love between a man and woman,
This is the only charm to set us free,
And this the only omen
Of immortality.
Only for us, the long, long war is over
Between our aspiring spirits,
And all the flesh inherits,
Because, dear saint, your soul no less
Has got a lover,
Than has your body's long slim loveliness.
Ah, my beloved, think not renunciation
Of such a love as ours
Will bring you any strengthening of your powers,
Or calm, or dignity, or peace of mind
To be compared with that which you will find
In love's full consummation.
Talk not to me of other, older ties,

Of duty, and of narrower destinies,
Nor bid me see that we have met too late,
While we have lips and eyes
To kiss and call;
But rather thank our fate,
For this mad gift — that we have met at all.
Come to me then. Ah, must I bid you come?
Your heart is mine. Is then your will so loath?
Leave him from whom your spirit long since fled,
Whose house is not your home; your only home,
Although the same roof never cover both,
Is where I am, until we both are dead.

(*Her child speaks.*)

Why do you look at me with such a shade
Upon your eyes, so still and steadily?
I am not naughty, but I am afraid;
I know not why.
The world is huge and puzzling and perverse —
Even my nurse,
When most my heart is stirred,
Will put me by, with some complacent word;
Or, if she listens, in a little while

Babbles my deepest secret with a smile.
My mother, oh my mother, only you
Are kind and just and honorable and true.
Others are fond, others will play and sing,
Will kiss me, or will let me kiss and cling;
But only you, my mother, comprehend
How little children feel and love the truth;
Only you cherish like an equal friend
The shy and tragic dignity of youth.

(*The woman answers her lover.*)

All my life long I think I dreamt of this.
Even as a girl, my visions were of you.
Alas, I grew incredulous of bliss;
And now too late, too late, the dream comes true.
Sweet are the charms you offer me, my lover,
To read the riddle of the universe,
And in your arms I should not soon discover
Our old, old mortal curse.
And yet I put them by, because I trust
In other magic, far beyond the ken
Even of you, the tenderest of men,—
In spells more permanent than any sorrow,

Which bind me to the past, and make to-morrow
My own, although I sleep it through in dust,—
The revelation which to every woman
Her children bring,
Making her one, not only with things human,—
With every living thing.
For only mothers raise no passionate cry
Against mortality;
For only they have learnt the reason why
It is worth while to live; and presently,
Seeing Nature's meaning, are content to die.

SONG IN EXILE

The rustling palms bend readily
  Between the sun and me;
The trades blow warm and steadily
  Across the turquoise sea;
But I'd rather feel the March wind bite
  In the country of the free.

Hibiscus and camellias
  Bloom here abundantly,
And roses and gardenias —
  The sweetest flowers there be —
But I'd rather see through the bare north woods
  One bridal dogwood tree.

The tropic light is mellow
  As a lamp in a lighted room;

The sun shines high and yellow
  In the quivering cloudless dome;
But, oh, for the snow and the cruel cold
  And the rigors of my home!

BATALHA

In this still cloister where the roses grow
  Waist-high between the arches and the well,
You would have walked a thousand years ago,
  So faithful, who are now so infidel;
You would have fancied your wild heart's emotion
  Over the beauty of a scene like this,
A mystic piety, a pure devotion —
    And so, perhaps, it is.

Under the shade of column and of tracing,
  Here in the dusk, where swallows dart and fly,
Barefoot and cowled, I think I see you pacing,
  Brooding o'er thoughts of subtle mystery;
Fasting and prayer, and music and desire
  Weaving a mood that men no longer know —
Oh, yes, my dear, you would have been a friar,
    A thousand years ago.

EASTON'S BEACH

Last night I saw a city by the sea,
  Outlined in sparks of fire;
Those wreathed lamps made all a fantasy —
  Arch, dome and spire.

I saw above the waters pale and gray,
  The pale moon stand,
I heard, but faint and sweet and far away,
  A martial band.

The distant voices in the streets, the sound
  Of laughter from the towers
Made where we swam the solitude profound:
  The sea was ours.

THE RAILROAD STATION

Just a very common thing —
Shouts and whistles, bells that ring,
Just a platform in the rain
And a slowly moving train;
Just a woman dressed in black
Standing by a station-hack,
Gazing with her eyes profound
As the train goes outward bound;
And her bearing does not say
Who it is that goes away,
One who made her pulses stir,
Or a guest who wearied her.

TO A CERTAIN GENTLEMAN

("Women are often tempters to sexual sin and delight in it. . . . A recent report of a female probation officer relates that some of the girls who, as we may say euphemistically 'had gone astray,' owned to her that they enjoyed the life of the evil house." —*The Case Against Woman Suffrage,* published by the Man-Suffrage Association Opposed to Political Suffrage for Women.)

It may be so, good sir, it may be so,
Not all who sin are tempted — that we know:
It may be darker things than this are true,
And yet, upon my soul, if I were you —
A man, no longer young, at peace, secured
From all that tempting women have endured
Of poverty and ignorance and fear
And joy that make youth terrible and dear,
If I were you, before I took my pen
And wrote those words to hearten other men,
And give them greater sense of moral ease
In the long score of common sins like these,
If I were you, I would have held my hand
In fire.

Ah, well; you would not understand.

HOUSE PETS

The white cat is sleeping by the fire,
With her paws tucked under her chin,
Very tame and gentle she is sleeping
Whom I saw but now come in,

Come in from the dark night and the wild wood,
A hunter with her prey she came,
And her chin and her little paws were bloody,
And she was not kind and tame,

But wild and strong and cruel with her victim,
For she let it go, and caught it as it ran,
And she tossed it in the air and danced about it,
And once she stood erect like a man.

And I thought, "what wild things are they that we
harbor,
Who bend to the routine of daily life;"
And I looked across the room and by the fire
I saw my sleeping wife.

TO AN OLD LADY IN A TRAIN

Her hair was beautifully white
Beneath her bonnet, black as night,
Which, plainly of New England kin,
Was tied with strings beneath her chin.
And when she spoke I had no choice
But listened to that soft crisp voice;
And when she smiled, I saw the truth,
She had been lovely in her youth,
And with those quick, observing eyes,
Was charming still to all the wise.
And still, in spite of bonnet strings,
She thought keen, quaint, amusing things,
With gaiety that many hold
Remarkable in one so old.

We talked ten minutes in a train,
And when we came to part again,
"Good-bye, enjoy yourself," said she,

I told her that ahead of me
No pleasure beckoned, no, I said,
Stern duty only lay ahead!
"Oh, well," her parting answer ran,
"Enjoy yourself the best you can."
And so unconquerably gay,
She went upon her darkening way.

SPRING

"Yes, Spring has come," the grocer said,
And tied a final knot of string,
Rang up the change and becked his head,
Elated at the breath of Spring.

"Yes, Spring has come," the poet said,
And poured his ecstasy in rhymes,
Which eager, homesick exiles read,
Long winter-locked in frozen climes.

Perhaps the grocer's way was best,—
If joy can better be, or worse:
He saved his rapture unexpressed,
The poet spent his for a verse.

A BREAD AND BUTTER LETTER

THERE is a willow grows beside a pool;
  Its long gray branches sweep the marble rim;
And from those waters shadowy and cool,
  The stars shine, large and dim.

From open valleys filled with little lakes
  All through the night a hundred breezes blow,
All through the night the little willow makes
  A whispering soft and low.

Here in the dusty street there are no trees
  To whisper, and the sky is dark and gray,
And yet I see the stars, I feel the breeze,
  So far, so far away.

THE PARTY

The house is bright with lights and lights,
Like a palace in the Arabian Nights,
Lights in festoons and lights in clusters,
In chandeliers and crystal lustres;
And all the length of the stairs' broad way,
Tapestries green and pink and gray
Tell a story of ladies' bowers
Hung with apples and paved with flowers;
And beyond, an open arch discloses
An inner garden of palms and roses,
With lines of lilies against the walls,
And a fountain that falls — and waits — and falls.
And from the ballroom comes the beat
Of dance music and dancing feet,
And through the doorways of gold and glass
Figures of dancers pass and pass,
Lovely creatures in dripping laces,
And all have sad, unhopeful faces.

One person only yields to joy,
And he is a footman — a round-faced boy —
Stiff in a livery of black and green,
And he laughs at something heard or seen,
Laughs with a loud and lonely gladness,
Laughs perhaps at the dancers' sadness;
He only seemed for an instant gay,
And he was instantly sent away.

THE HISTORY OF A MINUTE

I SAW a lady on the stair,
And she was, oh, so strangely fair,
With a knot of butter-colored hair,
And a waiting, listening, wondering air.
She was tall as a lady ought to be,
And down she looked and smiled at me.
Her eyes were queerly brightly blue
As the bit of sky that last shines through
The gathering clouds, oppressive, gray,
On a chilly windy Autumn day.
There she paused on the stairs and smiled
Like a child who sees another child
With whom it would dearly like to play
If it only could get its nurse away.
And I know not what divine surmise
Leapt up like fire in my eyes,
But I know her smiling suddenly stopped,

And a curtain between us blankly dropped,
And she passed me by as if I were
A man invisible to her.

BEFORE SPRING

Fare you well, who love the highways,
Love the cities, tall and bright,
For the forest ways are my ways,
And the birds' songs my delight,
And the stars in river byways
Are my only lamps by night.

I shall see the Spring awaking
While you think it winter still,
Watch the brittle ice forsaking
Edge of marsh and pool and rill,
And the little willows making
Yellow mists against the hill.

Go you to the things you care for,
Violins with trembling string,
Jewels that men do and dare for,
Every lovely, man-wrought thing;
They have caught your spirit, therefore
You have left me ere the Spring.

THE STARS

Only the stars remain to travelers' eyes
  Unalterable; the waters change their hue
Beneath the flattery of alien skies
  From jade to silver and from bronze to blue.

Sunrise and sunset spread their lovely light
  As slow as solemn music in the North;
But southward, like a dart descends the night,
  And like a meteor the day breaks forth.

And faiths and manners vary — friends, they say,—
  And even lovers of a constant mind;
Not the light loves we meet upon our way
  But those enchained by vows we left behind.

Only unchanged the patterned stars endure,
  As when they first assured or threatened man;
Still Vega glitters, crystalline and pure,
  Still like an angry eye Aldebaran.

TO REMORSE

Magic for fitful souls whose aim is still
Pleasures that forfeit not the mansions blest,
Who deem themselves absolved to approve the best
While they, protesting hate, pursue the ill;
Who lack strength to attain or else lack will
To keep what was their will's supreme behest;
Daring in dreams but fearful of the test
When Time and Fate their dearest wish fulfil.
I will not taste of thy pale anodyne;
I will not alter, listening to a voice
That tells me joys immortal may be mine
Were I but traitor to my clearest choice.
Courage I count above all gifts of thine —
Courage or to refrain or to rejoice.

THE PRICE OF PEACE

LONG since I taught my spirit to obey
The Sage's great commandment — to forget —
And so to lose life's bitterness and fret
And taste its sweetness; and I went my way
Eluding joy and sorrow, grave and gay,
And lived exempt, my being always set
Upon the striking hour, without regret,
Secure, refreshed, remote from yesterday.
But oh my friend, my love, my very dear,
My practised wisdom is a curse to me;
I do forget, and when you are not near
It is, by Heaven, as if you ceased to be;
And I would buy with agony and fear
One hour, one little hour of memory.

AN AMERICAN TO FRANCE

O FRANCE, with what a shamed and sorry smile
We now recall that in a bygone day
We sought of you art, wit, perfection, style;
You were to us a playground and a play.
Paris was ours — its sudden green edged spaces
And sweeping vistas to the coming night,
Brocades and jewels, porcelains and laces —
All these we took for leisure and delight.
And all the time we should have drunk our fill
Of wisdom known to you and you alone,
Clear-eyed self-knowledge, silent courage, will;
And now too late, we see these things are one:
That art is sacrifice and self-control,
And who loves beauty must be stern of soul.

STRANGE GODS

The great religions, like men great of mind,
Draw to them even those of hostile view.
Many a barbarian in Athens knew
The temple porches who was grossly blind
To any god save one long left behind —
Some hideous idol on a mountain blue,
For whom his heart ached, timorous and true,
And, lonely in the Parthenon, repined.
But home returning over difficult seas
To his own people, had he no regret?
No envy for those Greeks who bent their knees
Only where beauty and religion met?
Could he forget the temple and the trees?
Could he the grey-eyed Pallas so forget?

NEWPORT

On these brown rocks the waves dissolve in spray
As when our fathers saw them first alee.
If such a one could come again and see
This ancient haven in its latter day,
These haughty palaces and gardens gay,
These dense, soft lawns, bedecked by many a tree
Borne like a gem from Ind or Araby;
If he could see the race he bred, at play —
Bright like a flock of tropic birds allured
To pause a moment on the southward wing
By these warm sands, and by these summer seas —
Would he not cry, "Alas, have I endured
Exile and famine, hate and suffering,
To win religious liberty for these?"

BRANDON

The house is empty, and the garden alley,
A shadowed aisle of linden and of yew,
A marble vase, a glimpse of river-valley —
Translucent white against transparent blue —
A mystery of boxwood and of byway,
Beneath barred windows and unopened door,
And far below the river like a highway
Sweeps on, but brings no travelers any more.
Beauty alone is constant; where she chooses
A dwelling-place, there would she ever stay;
Fortune and friends and fashion though it loses,
Beauty more faithful does not pass away,
But most deserted, most herself she seems,
Left to her deep and solitary dreams.

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